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NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW
15 January 1984

Did Agca Act Alone? By Edward Jay Epstein

THE PLOT TO KILL THE POPE

By Paul B. Henze.

216 pp. New York:

Charles Scribner's Sons. \$14.95.

THE TIME OF THE ASSASSINS

By Claire Sterling. A William Abrahams Book /

264 pp. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston. \$14.95.

ON May 13, 1981, Mehmet Ali Agca, an escaped murderer from Turkey, raised a pistol above his head in the piazza in front of St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City and shot and wounded Pope John Paul II. Captured at the scene by Italian police, he freely admitted firing the shots and was tried and sentenced to life imprisonment. Mr. Agca had previously confessed to the political assassination of a well-known newspaper editor in Istanbul and in February 1979 he had threatened in a letter to kill Pope John Paul II, whom he accused of being "the Commander of the Crusades" against Islam. So, investigating agencies and the media quickly concluded that he acted as a lone fanatic when he shot the Pope.

Now two well-documented books strongly dispute this conclusion. Paul Henze's "Plot to Kill the Pope" and Claire Sterling's "Time of the Assassins" are both based on extraordinary investigations into Balkan intrigues. They both relentlessly trace the assassin's trail to Rome, beginning with his dramatic escape from prison in Turkey in November 1979, and following his passage through Iran, Bulgaria and Germany. They give similar descriptions of the final arrangements for the assassination, saying that Mr. Agca was picked up at 3 P.M. that day by a Bulgarian intelligence officer and airline official named Sergei Antonov who was accompanied by two Bulgarian diplomats. They handed him a gun and drove him to St. Peter's Square to shoot the Pope. Both authors reach the same conclusion — the papal assassination had been organized and controlled by the Bulgarian secret service on behalf of the Soviet Union's security agency, the K.G.B., and Mr. Agca merely served as a paid gunman.

These books also proceed from a common origin, the Reader's Digest. Mr. Henze, who was the Central Intelligence Agency station chief in Turkey from 1974 to 1977, was hired in the summer of 1981 by the Reader's Digest

to investigate Mr. Agca's background in Turkey and his connections to Bulgaria. After Mr. Henze had completed his original investigation, Mrs. Sterling was retained by the Reader's Digest to prepare a magazine article about Mr. Agca. She then conducted her own inquiry, drawing on high-level sources in Italian intelligence she had used for her last book, "The Terror Network." Her article, published in September 1982, reopened a debate in the media about whether Mr. Agca really did act alone.

Mr. Henze continued to fuel the controversy by selling his research on the Bulgarian connection to other news organizations, including NBC (which broadcast its own White Paper on the plot in September 1982) and Newsweek. He made it available later to The New York Times for a fee. He also wrote articles under his own name in The Christian Science Monitor and Encounter. Both Mr. Henze and Mrs. Sterling then expanded their investigations into these two books. In her autobiographical account, Mrs. Sterling focuses on press and government reactions to her disclosures about the assassination attempt. Mr. Henze writes about the wider geopolitical context and motivation of the assassination attempt.

Although evidence, unlike acts of faith, is contingent on external circumstances, Mrs. Sterling and Mr. Henze both hold their evidence to be incontrovertible. Mrs. Sterling insists that the "logic [is] inescapable," that Mr. Agca had "come to Rome as a professional hit man, hired by a Bulgarian spy ring," and Mr. Henze places the existence of the plot "beyond debate." Although they both rely on the Turkish journalist Ugur Mumcu's investigation into the Bulgarian connection and repeatedly cite him as a source, they do not even contend with the very different answer he arrives at based on very much the same evidence. Mr. Mumcu concludes in his book, "Agca Dosyasi," that Mr. Agca attempted the assassination not on behalf of the Bulgarians or the K.G.B. but for a neofascist Turkish terrorist organization called "The Grey Wolves" (whose members literally howl like a wolf pack). Mrs. Sterling does not even mention his conclusion, or his book about Mr. Agca, while Mr. Henze pre-emptively dismisses the book on the grounds that Mr. Mumcu is a "leftist."

Mrs. Sterling and Mr. Henze base their theory that the Bulgarians arranged the assassination attempt on three main findings. First, they show that Mr. Agca received considerable assistance from Turkish fugitives for many months after he escaped from the Turkish prison where he had been confined in 1979 — including money, a faked passport, hideouts, contacts and the weapon to use against the Pope. Then they establish that the immediate source of this support was a group of Turkish arms smugglers based in Bulgaria. Finally, they demonstrate that these Turkish smugglers had close liaisons with the Bulgarian secret service.

To be sure, they support these findings with convincing arguments and evidence. Even if these three layers of conspiratorial connections are fully accepted, how-

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